DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 267 623 FL 015 575

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TITLE In Pursuit of Trivia -- Game Theory and Research Skills.
PUB DATE Nov 85
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the TRI-TESOL Conference (Bellevue, Washington, November 14-16, 1985).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Class Activities; Course Content; *English (Second Language); *Games; Higher Education; *Language Skills; *Library Skills; Research Skills; Second Language Instruction; *Student Developed Materials
IDENTIFIERS Lewis and Clark College OR; *Trivial Pursuit

ABSTRACT

One of a group of modular courses developed for a college-level program in English as a second language (ESL) is an intermediate level course designed to help students develop their knowledge of the world through language. The course, modeled on the popular game Trivial Pursuit, requires students to learn library skills and perform research on a variety of topics, discuss the material researched and other relevant cultural information in classroom sessions, and prepare a final project, a student-designed version of the game. All activities are organized to lead the learner from the familiar to the unfamiliar. Occasional trivia quizzes are used to force students to make new associations and to acquire new information in order to play the game. The course design helps students develop cognitive and language abilities while it encourages lively discussions, enthusiastic information-seeking, and formation of friendships. (MSE)

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In Pursuit of Trivia -- Game Theory and Research Skills

by Norman J. Yoshida

Recognizing that students need to use "real" language and that their interest in the content of specific subjects motivates them to immerse themselves in their studies, ESL teachers have begun to design curricula which incorporate content-oriented courses. The curriculum at the Institute for the Study of American Language and Culture, Lewis and Clark College, for example, has been revised in the past few years to reflect this emphasis on integrated, often content-based courses. Thus in lieu of the more traditional paradigm of courses -- namely, courses in reading, in writing, in grammar, and in listening/speaking -- the Institute presently offers at each of its five levels of instruction a two-hour "core" (an integrated reading and writing class), a course in listening/speaking, and a series of five-week modular courses. Students are offered choices of "mod" courses, and enrollment in these courses is of mixed levels. The types of courses offered can be seen in the winter 1986 schedule:

	First 5 Weeks	Second 5 Weeks
Levels 1 and 2	U. S. Culture	Reading and Skits
Levels 1 and 2	Science	Basic Math
Levels 3 and 4	World Geography	Mysteries
Levels 3 and 4	Law	Computers
Level 5	Literature of the West	Science

A modular course labeled Trivial Pursuit was one that I developed and offered to level 3 (intermediate) and 4 (advanced intermediate) students during the summer of 1985 because it fit well into our integrated curriculum. Too, I believed that the design of such a course would be consistent with current schema theory and that it would meet the goal in language instruction of helping students to develop their knowlege of the world. (The course encouraged students to activate schemata already a part of their knowedge, thereby making it possible for them to develop new and different schemata.) Using as a point of departure the popular game of Trivial Pursuit, I put together a course that not only required students to use a variety of library resources but also helped students add to their "world knowledge." As a final project student were asked to create Trivial Pursuit games which they could play and enjoy.

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After an initial session, during which I explained the rationale for offerings such an unusual course (part of which involved discussions of the meanings of "trivial" and the "pursuit of trivia"), we were quickly into library work and the ferreting out of resources, primarily those found in the reference sections of libraries. (Since students at level 4 are required to write some type of research paper during the term and are taught to use the card catalog and The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature, they required no orientation to those resources. Level 3 students did, however, need an orientation to both the card catalog and The Reader's Guide.)

Class sessions were devoted to the following types of activities:

1. Research in the library, during which students worked alone, in pairs, or in groups to locate specified types of information. (During these sessions I served as a resource person, answering questions, helping students to locate materials, and paraphrasing difficult reading material.)

2. Regular class sessions, during which students and I discussed material they had researched, and during which students were given brief quizzes on resources, library procedures, etc.

3. Class project sessions, during which students, in designated groups, were given time to prepare their gameboards, to recopy questions and answers onto 3 x 5 notecards, and to cut out wedge-shaped pieces from construction paper that were used in lieu of the tiny plastic wedges which accompany commercially prepared sets of Trivial Pursuit.

Topics for research and discussion included the following:

1. Countries of the World
2. Geography/Climate
3. Major Historical Events
4. Occupations/Majors
5. Words (Etymology)
6. Military Science/Code Names

7. Inventions
8. Western Civilization (Art, History, Education)
9. Famous People
10. Superstitions, Myths, and Symbols

It should be noted here that all activities were designed to lead from the familiar to the unfamiliar. Thus, while researching countries of the world, students were first asked to design questions related to their own countries/cultures (e.g., "What is the capital of the United Arab Emirates?" "What Japanese food -- a vinegar flavored rice -- has become popular recently in the United States?"). By working with such questions initially, students were able not only to share information about their own cultures but also to gain a "feel" for the types of questions appropriate to a game of Trivial Pursuit. A question such as "What was the population of Tokyo in 1970?" would not have been considered appropriate (unless accompanied by multiple answer choices). On the other hand, a question such as "In what year did the US put the first man on the moon?" would have been considered appropriate, as the event could be considered historically significant.

Each week students were required to hand in a given number of cards based on assigned subjects. For example, towards the end of the term students were asked to prepare questions/answers on superstitions, myths, symbols. Again, moving from the familiar to the unfamiliar, students first prepared cards based on superstitions and symbols which were a part of their own cultures. Later they were asked to research myths, etc., of the Greeks and Romans, as well as the folktales of North America. A wealth of new information was thus brought to class -- information which made possible fascinating discussions often based on comparisons. For example, the question "What do mothers in the United Arab Emirates tell their children when they want their children to behave?" generated discussion on the significance of fruits, as the answer to the question is: "They tell their children that the plum tree is moving." Think of the significance of the apple in the Garden of Eden, the apple in the fairy tale "Snow White," etc. Think of the relationship between the legend of Pandora, the first mortal woman on earth, and Eve. The information brought to class by students served as stimuli for discussions that required them to call up their own background knowledge. At the same time, these discussions provided new information that could be linked to existing knowledge.

On one side of the cards submitted by students was a question; on the other, an answer to the question and, when appropriate, a bibliographical citation. By requiring the use of citations, I hoped to encourage students to learn the conventions of documentation they would need to use in research papers. It also enabled me to check on questions or answers about which I had some doubt. Having collected cards, I then reviewed and revised them. When a question appeared to be obscure, I eliminated the card; in other cases, where a question was not well formed, I revised it to correct syntax and/or spelling, or to disambiguate the question. Then, at regular intervals, students brought revised cards to class and placed them on a table. They were told to select cards and to memorize the questions and answers. (They were not allowed to select questions that dealt with their own countries or cultures.) They were also asked to record only questions on individual Trivial Pursuit Question Sheets. After 20 questions had been studied, I collected the question sheets and redistributed them a few days later as a form of Trivia Quiz.

The scores on quizzes were of no real consequence, as the quizzes were merely a way of getting students to add to their repertoire of knowledge by forcing them to make new associations between the information gained and the knowledge which they already possessed. In the end, of course, this accumulation of information made it possible for students to play more successfully the games they had developed.

For our Trivia gameboards we used large white cardboard sheets onto which were drawn large segmented circles patterned after the commercially available boards. Sections of the boards were then colored with felt markers. For tokens we used wedges cut out of colored construction paper, and for question/answer cards we used 3 x 5 notecards color-coded with felt markers as to category (e.g., history, art and literature, etc.). Rules of the game were essentially those of the commercially available game.

The type of course described here has the potential for helping students develop not only their cognitive abilities, but their affective skills as well. They scour the library shelves in search of new information and, in the course of their pursuit, often make new friends -- those with similar interests, personalities, and/or abilities. In short, they participate in collaborative language acquisition activities. They also engage in lively discussions, often asking questions of each other's research, and thereby develop their library skills while simultaneously

adding to their knoweldge of the world. In the course of their active pursuit of knowledge, they practice their reading skills, their writing skills, and their listening/speaking skills as well. In pursuit of mere trivia? Not at all. For the pursuit of new information is never truly trivial.

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